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ABSTRACT

A study surveyed secondary vocational and nonvocational public school principals to determine whether there was a significant difference in their legal knowledge. The questionnaire, Legal Knowledge Index, was developed with the assistance of expert review and then piloted to establish its validity and reliability. A random sample of 136 principals was drawn from those listed in the 1995-96 West Virginia Public School Directory and questionnaires were mailed to them. Usable responses were received from 120. Descriptive statistics such as percentages, frequencies, central tendencies, and measures of association were used to describe the data. Results of a t-test revealed no significant difference in the legal knowledge held by secondary vocational and non-vocational public school principals. Findings suggested vocational principals were less likely to have completed a course in school law, had completed more years of teaching experience, and were employed mostly in "small town" school districts. Nonvocational principals were more likely to have more years of administrative experience and scored higher on the Legal Knowledge Index. The recommendation was for vocational principals to become more familiar with and competent in ethical and legal aspects of education in the public school system. (YLB)

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Comparison of the Legal Knowledge of Secondary Vocational and Non-Vocational School Principals

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to survey secondary vocational and non-vocational public school principals to ascertain if there was a significant difference in their legal knowledge. The population (N=210) was all secondary vocational and non-vocational public school principals listed in the 1995-1996 West Virginia Public School Directory. A simple random sample (n=136) was drawn to provide data for this study. Internal consistency reliability (Cronbach's alpha) of the instrument was .7182. Results of the t-test revealed that there was not a significant difference (p>,05) in the legal knowledge held by secondary vocational and non-vocational school principals in this study. It was recommended that vocational principals should become familiar and competent with ethical and legal aspects of education in the public school system.

Comparison of the Legal Knowledge of Secondary Vocational and Non-Vocational School Principals

A superficial understanding of school law is becoming increasingly inadequate for the principal of the 1990's. The principal's legal knowledge must go beyond a shallow, mechanical level so that fuller appreciation of liability risks can be reached. The principal's job has changed dramatically since 1969 as a result of the law's influx into the classroom (Doverspike, 1990).

Results of a study by Reglin (1990) revealed that many secondary school principals needed to know more about the laws that govern their profession. According to Osborn (1990), Clark (1990), and Bagnato (1990), secondary school principals who had completed one school law course were significantly more knowledgeable than those with no such course work, thus supporting the idea that such education will enhance knowledge. Osborn (1990) reported that no significant differences based on educational level or years of administrative experience were found among secondary school principals.

Bagnato (1990) and Nawne (1986) indicate that school district size of secondary principals was not related significantly to their knowledge or ability to apply the law. However, size of the school district and role of the administrator were related significantly to the importance administrators assigned to select information sources.

The review of related literature revealed no comparative studies focusing specifically on the legal knowledge of secondary vocational and non-vocational public school principals.

Definition of Terms

The following definition of terms are applicable to this study:

Mid-Size City - Central city of a Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area (SMSA) with the city having a population less than 6,000 people per square mile.

Urban Fringe of Mid-Size City - Place within a SMSA of a mid-size central city and defined as urban by the Census Bureau.

Large Town - Town within a SMSA, with a population greater than or equal to 25,000.

Small Town - Town not within a SMSA and with a population less than 25,000 and greater than or equal to 2,500 people.

Rural - A place with less than 2,500 people or a place having a zip code designated rural by the Census Bureau.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to survey secondary vocational and non-vocational public school principals to ascertain if there was a significant difference in their legal knowledge. The research questions were as follows:

1. What are the demographic characteristics of secondary vocational and non-vocational public school principals?
2. Are secondary vocational and non-vocational school principals knowledgeable about legal concepts?
3. Is there a significant difference in legal knowledge held by secondary vocational and non-vocational school principals?

Research Methodology

Population and Sample

The population (N=210) was all secondary vocational and non-vocational public school principals listed in the 1995-1996 West Virginia Public School Directory. The sample size (n=136) was calculated based upon a formula presented by Tuckman (1978, p. 231-232). The formula derived the sample size based upon an anticipated five percent margin of sampling error, and 95 percent confidence interval.

Instrumentation

The questionnaire, Legal Knowledge Index, was developed with the assistance of expert review and then piloted to establish its validity and reliability. Internal consistency reliability (Cronbach's alpha) was completed and was found to be .718. The first part of the questionnaire consisted of items requesting demographic information. The second part was a 40-item instrument developed for assessing knowledge of West Virginia school law.

Data Collection

The questionnaire, along with a cover letter and a self-addressed envelope, were mailed to each of the 136 secondary school principals during the spring semester of the academic year 1995-96. To maximize response rate, the Total Design Method (TDM) was utilized (Dillman, 1978). The initial mailing and two follow-up mailings yielded an 88.23% (120) response rate

which consisted of 27 vocational secondary principals (22.5%) and 93 non-vocational secondary principals (77.5%).

The results of the t-test procedure revealed no significant differences in responses of early and late respondents. Therefore, the data collected was judged to be representative of the target population (Miller and Smith, 1983).

Analysis of Data

The data were analyzed using SPSS/PC+. Descriptive statistics such as percentages, frequencies, central tendencies, and measures of association were used to describe the data. A t-test procedure was conducted to determine if there was a significant difference in the legal knowledge held by secondary vocational and non-vocational public school principals.

Results

Demographic Characteristics

Table 1 displays demographic characteristics of secondary vocational and non-vocational school principals. Over five percent (11) of the respondents in this study had no legal education. A higher proportion (7.4%) of the vocational principals had completed two classes and two workshops when compared to the non-vocational (4.3%) principals. Over 60% (18) of the vocational principals reported having completed 10 years or more of teaching experience when compared to about 49% (45) of non-vocational school principals. A higher proportion (75%) of non-vocational principals reported having completed 10 years or more of administrative experience when compared to vocational principals. A majority (51.9%) of the vocational

principals reported that they worked in "small town" school districts. In comparison, non-vocational principals (53.7%) were more inclined to be employed in "rural town" school districts.

Insert Table 1 about here

Legal Knowledge of Participants

Table 2 summarizes the top ten legal knowledge questions which respondents were least likely to answer correctly. Ranked at the top (92.60%) for vocational principals was the question, "is it important to be able to distinguish between abuse and neglect?" For non-vocational principals, the question, "can gender be a relevant factor in selection of a school counselor?" was assigned a rank of "1" (84.94%).

Insert Table 2 about here

Table 3 presents legal knowledge scores of secondary vocational and non-vocational school principals. A higher percentage (76.4%) of non-vocational principals scored 70% and higher (28-35) on the Legal Knowledge Index when compared to 63% (17) of the vocational principals.

Insert Table 3 about here

Means and standard deviations of legal knowledge scores are provided in Table 4. The entire sample had a mean legal knowledge score of 29.18 (SD=3.65). Results of the t-test revealed that there was not a significant difference ($p>.05$) in the legal knowledge held by

secondary vocational (M=28.40, SD=3.50) and non-vocational school principals (M=29.47, SD=3.64) in this study.

Insert Table 4 about here

Conclusions

The results of this study suggest that vocational teachers (14.8%) were less likely to have completed a course in school law, had completed more years of teaching experience, and were employed mostly in "small town" school districts when compared to non-vocational principals.

Non-vocational principals were more likely to have more years of administrative experience, and also scored higher on the Legal Knowledge Index when compared to vocational principals. These findings probably suggest that the "typical" non-vocational educator is more likely to serve in an administrative role when compared to their counterparts. A commonalty of this study, is that both vocational and non-vocational principals were less likely to be employed in mid-size city, urban fringe-mid size-city, and large town school districts. This finding is probably attributed to the fact that about 58% (84) of the school districts in West Virginia are classified as "rural" (Johnson, 1989).

Educational Significance

With the passage of the recent Senate Bill 300 and the 1990 Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Applied Technology Act, there is a need for vocational principals to be more familiar and competent with ethical and legal aspects of education in the public school system.

Senate Bill 300 (passed March 8,1996, in effect from passage): Amends W.Va. Code §§ 18-1-1, 18-1-4, 18-2-6, 18-2E-4, 18-2E-5, 18-2E-6, 18-5A-4, 18-1-1, 18A-3a-1, and enacts new W. Va. Code §§ 18-2E-8, 18A-3-2c, and 18A-3A-1, requiring full implementation of a process of "work-based learning," involving, among other things, partnerships with business, labor, higher education, economic development organizations, and other entities to achieve the goal that high school graduates will be prepared fully for college, other post-secondary education or gainful employment, particularly in the delivery of programs that provide work-based learning opportunities for students within the school or at the work place; and establishing a formal principals academy which all principals must attend.

This study provides baseline data which will serve as a framework for developing statewide seminars and workshops for prospective secondary vocational school principals.

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Table 1
Demographic Characteristics of Secondary Vocational and Non-Vocational School Principals (n = 120)

Characteristic	Vocational		Non-Vocational		Cramer's V
	n = 27	%	n = 93	%	
Legal Education					.15
No legal education	4	14.8	7	7.5	
One class	10	37.1	37	39.8	
One workshop	1	3.7	3	3.2	
One class and one workshop	2	7.4	4	4.3	
One class and two or more workshops	2	7.4	10	10.8	
Two classes	2	7.4	13	14.0	
Two or more workshops	3	11.1	14	15.1	
Two classes and one workshop	1	3.7	1	1.0	
Two classes and two workshops	2	7.4	4	4.3	
Teaching Experience					.17
Less than 10 years	9	33.3	48	52.2	
10 years or more	18	66.7	45	47.8	
Administrative Experience					.07
Less than 10 years	9	33.3	23	25	
10 years or more	18	66.7	70	75	
Community					.19
Mid-size city	1	3.7	8	8.7	
Urban fringe mid-size city	2	7.4	9	9.8	
Large town	1	3.7	4	4.3	
Small town	14	51.9	22	23.9	
Rural town	9	33.3	50	53.7	

Table 2
Rank of Top Ten Legal Knowledge Questions Which Vocational and Non-Vocational Principals Were Least Likely to Answer Correctly

	Vocational			Non-Vocational		
	n = 27			n = 93		
Question	Frequency	Percentage	Rank	Frequency	Percentage	Rank
Is it important to be able to distinguish between abuse and neglect?	25	92.60	1	62	66.66	3
Are personal complaints protected by the First Amendment?	24	88.88	2	62	66.66	3
Can gender be a relevant factor in selection of a school counselor?	23	85.18	3	79	84.94	1
Can schools refuse to rehire probationary teachers for any reason?	21	77.77	4	57	61.29	5
Can a school board ever restrict teachers' rights to publicize their views?	20	74.07	5	56	60.21	6
If parents have religious objections to schooling, can they avoid sending their children to school?	20	74.07	5	69	74.19	2
Can public schools require students to participate in community service?	17	62.96	7	43	46.23	10
Can teachers or students be considered "public officials?"	13	48.14	8	--	----	--
Is a publication obscene if it contains offensive, vulgar, or "dirty" language?	12	44.44	9	47	50.53	8
Can minorities be dismissed when reductions occur as a result of desegregation?	12	44.44	9	45	48.38	9
Does a contract have to be in writing?	--	----	--	52	55.91	7

Note. Percents do not total 100 because of multiple responses.

Table 3
Crossbreaks of Legal Knowledge Scores of Secondary Vocational and Non-Vocational School Principals (n = 120)

Legal Knowledge Score[a]	Vocational		Non-Vocational	
	n = 27	%	n = 93	%
16-21	1	3.7	3	3.2
22-27	9	33.3	19	20.4
28-33	16	59.3	61	65.6
34-35	1	3.7	10	10.8
Total	27	100	93	100

Note. Cramer's V = .16.
[a] Raw scores are based on a maximum possible score of 40.

Table 4
Means and Standard Deviations of Legal Knowledge Scores of Secondary Vocational and Non-Vocational School Principals

	Variable	M[a]	SD	n
For	Entire Sample	29.18	3.65	120
	Vocational	28.40	3.50	27
	Non-Vocational	29.47	3.64	93

Note. [a]Raw scores are based on a maximum possible score of 40.